As a business school professor, when my students ask for career advice, I often recall Mark Twain’s words: “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” I think we all need to find our calling or vocation, our purpose in life. This might be seem out of vogue, but it’s returning to today’s business world, as I explain to my students and in my new book.

I don’t think of “a calling” or a vocation as necessarily God-centered or religion-based. It is about being connected to a purpose that is bigger than each of us, and caring enough to devote our lives, energies, passions, and love to address it. It reflects our appreciation for the connectedness we share with our planet and those around us. It requires that we intentionally balance how we relate to-and how much time we spend with-people we love, nature we enjoy, and wealth we acquire. It also requires that we consider deeply when our relationships are transactional and when they are relational. That is, when are our relationships devices for achieving our own success, and when are they for treating people and the natural world as a community that sustains and includes us? It calls for an awareness of subtle and not-so-subtle influences on our perceptions and decisions. Are our answers to these questions generated by our sense of our life’s purpose, or are we listening to others to decide what we are meant to be? Satisfaction in life’s work comes from knowing what each us are called to do, and then sticking with our own sense of “how a life well lived” is measured as we see where that spirit takes us. It is a life based not on pleasure, but on meaning.
We need more people who find their meaning in accepting the responsibility we face to steward our planetary ecosystems. Every generation faces its own Great Work, the obligation to fulfill “the special role that history has imposed upon them” where “the nobility of our lives...depends upon the manner in which we come to understand and fulfill our assigned role,” in the words of the cultural historian Thomas Berry. The Great Work of the 21st Century is represented by the Anthropocene, an era in which the influence of human activities has grown so vast, that they actually influence the global ecosystem. This imposes upon us a responsibility that we are ill-equipped to handle, but ignoring it burdens future generations with a hostile world for no other reason than that we were too selfish to care. The current generation has every right to be angry that this Great Work has been thrust upon it. And while we often don’t know the answers or even how to construct the questions, we must respond. The “nobility of our lives” will be determined by that effort.

The Great Work of Sustainable Business

The need to instill the pursuit of a calling to this Great Work is critical in business and business education. And business students seem to be fertile ground. As I look back at my 20 plus years as a professor, I see an interesting and hopeful shift. Where previous generations of graduate students went to schools of government and non-profit management to make a difference in the world, today many are going into schools of business. This shift acknowledges the awesome power that businesses have in our world, and the awesome responsibility that business managers have in running them. They can bring the world to sustainability, or bring it to ruin.

Many of the most critical solutions to problems like climate change, water scarcity and eco-system destruction must come from the economic market, including business, non-profit organizations, and governments. The market is the most powerful institution on Earth and, like it or not, business is the most powerful entity within it. Business will design the next building we live and work in, the food we eat, clothes we wear, and the automobile we drive and sources of energy that propels it —and the next form of mobility that replaces it. As I look at the next generation of business student’s passion and drive to make their contribution to finding solutions, I am left hopeful. These future managers and business leaders—and some of our current ones— are pursuing their calling, their vocation, their purpose in life, by bringing environmental stewardship into the center of their life’s work. As such, they can decide what world they want and work to make it so.

I encourage others to join this next generation and be open to the possibilities of a calling when deciding what their life’s work will be. Don’t ask “what do I want to be?” Instead, ask “What was I meant to be?” Transform your sense of work from a career in which you earn a living to a vocation in which you express a set of deeply held values in pursuit of goals far greater than yourselves.

I hope you will take up this charge; your lives and all of our lives will be better for it.

This essay is drawn from Finding Purpose: Environmental Stewardship as a
Finding Purpose: Environmental Stewardship as a Personal Calling


Andrew J. Hoffman is the Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise and Education Director at the Graham Sustainability Institute at the University of Michigan.

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